

BEFRIENDING A LITTLE WATTLE-BIRD

By CYRIL C. SPORN, Government School, Gosnells

"Freddie", the Little Wattle-bird (*Anthochaera chrysoptera*), came to us a small and rather unlovely little creature on October 23, 1947. The boy who gave it to us said that he had found the little bird lying in a bush, a few inches above water, where it had fallen from its nest which was some 10 to 15 feet above in a paper-bark tree. It was a nestling still in the downy stage, with pin feathers only just beginning to emerge.

The little bird was very feeble, but my wife managed to open its bill and feed it a little raw meat, which apparently gave it new strength for the next morning it was able to open its beak itself and demand food. It was duly christened "Freddie" but later we had reason to believe it should have been "Freda" as it often played at "nest making" by gathering fluffy material here and there and arranging it in anything handy; my wife's lap for instance, or in an old hat.

During the next few weeks the house chores and garden suffered somewhat as all our spare time was taken up in finding 'hoppers for "Freddie" who seemed to be always hungry. Fortunately, the schoolchildren helped out by catching grasshoppers during their recess periods. Later her food was largely supplemented with milk and sugar or honey, fed to her from a spoon, which she took in typical honeyeater fashion with her long brush-tipped tongue. "Freddie" grew apace and it was not long before she was standing up in her "nest"—an old dish, lined with soft rags—and trying out her wings. We taught her to fly by putting her on the branch of a gum sapling and calling to her from a little distance and soon "Freddie" was able to fly quite well.

At this stage she very nearly came to grief as a half tame butcher-bird we have about the place spotted her one day and tried to catch her but fortunately, my wife happened to be on the spot and "Freddie" flew straight to her for protection and dived into her cupped hands with the butcher-bird's beak snapping only inches behind her.

On one occasion as I was walking along with "Freddie" perching on my finger, she cocked her eye skywards and, apparently seeing something, instantly swung forward and down and being suspended under my hand, thus shielding herself from whatever she had seen above.

"Freddie" had full freedom and became well known all over Gosnells. She visited most of the neighbours more or less regularly within half a mile or more of our place and was made very welcome everywhere. Once she visited one of the local churches and delighted the preacher and the congregation by flitting from one lady's hat to another and testing for nectar any of those that were decorated with artificial flowers. There was further delight when "Freddie" settled on top of the organ and throwing her head up joined in

lustily in the singing. She often came to the school and visited the various classrooms, and frequently startled people walking to or from the railway station by dropping unexpectedly on their heads or shoulders from some nearby tree.



Little Wattle-bird perching on Mrs. Sporn's shoulder.

One day, one of the neighbours said to us: "That little bird of yours says 'Freddie'." So we listened for it and sure enough, during one of her early morning songs, picked out among her various notes something that sounded very like "Fweddle". Later, this became clearer and she made additions, and often while singing, would utter: "Come on Fweddle." "Fweddle boy! Fweddle Boy!" She also mimicked the soft warbling of a magpie.

Strangely enough, although "Freddie" was amiability itself anywhere away from our house, she became very pugnacious and intolerant to anyone, apart from ourselves who came to the house. She would register annoyance by a lowering of the head and a peculiar, rapid quivering of the wings and if prompt measures were not taken was liable to follow up with a claw attack on the person concerned. She made no attempt to peck with her beak. "Freddie" made it a practice to dive-bomb any stray cats she came across in the open and vigorously chased away most of the other birds that came around our place.

In feeding we never saw her catch a grasshopper herself. She caught only insects on the wing. She was also very adept at exploring all nooks and crannies with her tongue.

Round about February or March, 1948, "Freddie" began staying out till fairly late in the evening and sometimes showed a reluctance about coming in at all to her perch in the bathroom. Here it might be worth noting that these little birds leave no droppings under their perches at night. However all was well until May 6, the day before the school holidays. "Freddie" came off her perch and started her day with a very leisurely cleaning, followed by a very rapid, almost nervous kind of preening and then after giving her tail a quick shake would start off on her aerial evolutions. These usual morning exercises consisted of rapid point to point flying, twisting, dodging and turning, followed by a thorough grooming and preening of feathers. She had her usual spoonful of milk and honey, then went outside and after singing her greetings to the morning, departed on her customary round of visits.

This time she did not return.

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Range of the Chestnut-tailed Thornbill (*Acanthiza uropygialis*).

—I found the Chestnut-tailed Thornbill frequent in forest areas and occasional on scrub plain at Bilbarin, near Corrigin, during 1946, and I have recorded the species at Dulbellin, four miles west of Dandin. These observations suggest a slight extension of the range as given in Serventy and Whittell's *Birds of Western Australia*, which does not include "... the South-west corner, south and west of Moora, Wongan Hills, Kellerberrin and Lake Grace."

—ERIC H. SEDGWICK, Leonora.

Feeding of Red Wattle-birds.—A Red Wattle-bird (*Anthochaera carunculata*) perching on an overhanging eave of the house attracted my notice on October 24 last. Further observation disclosed that the bird was stretching down to take a spider from its web hanging to the eave. After repeated efforts it managed to seize and swallow the spider. From there it flew to another eave and repeated the performance. On October 31, at Mandurah many wattle-birds were feeding on the nectar from the flowers of *Banksia grandis* which was in full bloom along the estuary. One parent bird was taking the nectar from the flower and a young bird perched on the branch too, was taking the nectar in turn from the mother's beak.

—SYBIL ELLIOTT, Nedlands.